

# Kill the Hero

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/39742188) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/39742188>.

## Rating:

Teen And Up Audiences

## Archive Warning:

Graphic Depictions Of Violence

## Category:

F/M, Gen

## Fandom:

Percy Jackson and the Olympians - Rick Riordan, The Heroes of Olympus - Rick Riordan

## Relationship:

Annabeth Chase/Percy Jackson

## Character:

Percy Jackson, Annabeth Chase (Percy Jackson), Akhlys (Percy Jackson), Nyx (Percy Jackson), Bob | Iapetus (Percy Jackson), Tartarus (Percy Jackson), Polybotes (Percy Jackson), Small Bob (Percy Jackson)

## Additional Tags:

Percy Jackson in Tartarus, Betrayal, Dark Percy Jackson, Powerful Percy Jackson, Poison Control (Percy Jackson), Angst, oh so much angst, Hurt No Comfort, Percy Jackson's Fatal Flaw, BAMF Percy Jackson, Scared Annabeth Chase, Annabeth Chase Needs a Hug (Percy Jackson), Percy Jackson is a Mess, Percy Jackson Needs a Hug, Not Canon Compliant - The House of Hades (Heroes of Olympus), no beta we die like Percy's enemies, Minor Character Death, Blood Control (Percy Jackson), there is exactly one (1) hidden meme in this work, more tags later i gotta go to work lmao, Whump, Torture, (technically) - Freeform, Suicidal Ideation, Dark, Feral Percy Jackson, More Than Human Percy Jackson, Dangerous Percy Jackson, maverick's lost impulse control

## Language:

English

## Series:

Part 1 of [I Hear You're Alive \(How Disappointing\)](#)

**Stats:**

Published: 2022-06-19 Completed: 2022-06-29 Words: 12,679

Chapters: 2/2

# Kill the Hero

by [maverickk](#)

## Summary

"A slow death!" Misery had crowed at him. "A death from a thousand poisons!" And it was. It was slow, and painful, and terrible, and Percy wished he could he could say he wouldn't wish it on his worst enemies. But it wasn't *his* death, it was Akhlys's—and she deserved so much worse.

In which Percy Jackson goes A Bit Too Far, Annabeth Chase gets A Bit Too Scared, and the story changes for the worse.

## Notes

guys i've literally been working on this for over a year i am so *hyped* to finally post part one.

*disclaimer: The first 15 or so paragraphs are almost verbatim from the book with some minor changes to make it darker. Beyond that, everything is from my original plot idea.*

work and chapter titles from Black Veil Brides' [Kill The Hero](#).

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

# Fuel the Venom

“A slow death!” Akhlys screamed. “A death from a thousand poisons!”

All around her, poisonous plants grew and burst like over-filled balloons. Green-and-white sap trickled out, collecting into pools, and began flowing across the ground toward Percy. The sweet-smelling fumes made his head feel wobbly.

“Percy!” Annabeth’s voice sounded far away. She yelled out more names to Akhlys, calling her cheerful and Miss Wonderful, but the goddess of misery was now fixated on Percy. The poison ichor was all around him now, trapping him on an island of dust not much bigger than a shield. A few yards away, his backpack smoked and dissolved into a puddle of goo. Percy had nowhere to go.

He fell to one knee. He wanted to tell Annabeth to go, to leave him, but he couldn’t speak. His throat was as dry as dead leaves. Gods, he wished there was water in Tartarus. Something he could drink, or jump in, so he could heal, so he could control it. He’d settle for a half-empty bottle of it at this point.

So this is what dying felt like. Toxic fumes burning the back of his throat, filling his head with cotton, sapping his strength. It felt like being drained. He was aware of every scrap of energy evaporating and leaving him at the goddess’ mercy.

Distantly he heard Akhlys cackling about something, and Annabeth shouting. She was throwing drakon jerky at the goddess. The white-green poison kept pooling, little streams trickling from the plants as the venomous lake around him got wider and wider.

Lakes. Streams. Water.

Maybe the poison was frying his brain, but maybe it *wasn’t*. Poison was a liquid. If it moved like water, it must be partially water.

Percy croaked out a laugh. It was a crazy idea. Beyond crazy. Poseidon was the god of the sea, not of every liquid anywhere. Then again, Tartarus had its own rules. Fire was drinkable. The ground was the body of a dark god. The air was acid, and demigods could turn into smoky corpses. So why not try? He had nothing left to lose.

He closed his eyes and reached out. He was aware of the poison, knew

where it was. Now he just needed to tell it where to go. He focused on his anger and tried with everything in him. He tried so hard, something inside him cracked—as if a thick layer of ice covering a lake was shattering. Percy dove into that lake headfirst, and he felt it. He knew the second the poison submitted to his commands.

Warmth flooded through him. The poison tide stopped. The fumes blew away from him—back towards the goddess. The lakes of poison roiled toward her in violent waves.

“What is this?” Akhlys shrieked.

“Poison,” Percy sneered. “That’s your specialty, right?” He stood, anger growing hotter in his gut. As the flood of venom rolled toward the goddess, the fumes began to make her cough. Her eyes watered even more.

Percy laughed. *Oh, good, more water.* Percy imagined the goddess choking on her own tears, and her tears obliged. He focused—poison fueling her tears, tears filling her lungs. If the poison didn’t kill her first, she’d drown in a land without an ocean. Akhlys gagged and fell to her knees, right into the tide of venom at her feet. A sizzling like water drops on a hot iron filled the air as the goddess wailed.

Someone called his name. The poison, maybe, egging him on. Percy pushed forward.

Something...it was like something clicked into place. Percy felt whole, like he’d been breathing with one lung before and he hadn’t known it was any different until he got his other lung. That sheet of ice that cracked in Percy—he never wanted it to freeze over again.

He was going to take these new powers, take this new skill, and he was going to hone it. He even had the perfect target, right here. Percy was going to make this goddess choke on her own poison. He was going to drown her in it.

Percy was going to see how much misery Misery could take.

He heard his name again. Softer, this time, like the poison was whispering to him, chanting his name, bowing to his will. It was almost like the venom wanted this as much as Percy did. Well, far be it from him to hold it back.

Akhlys had had such a presence when he had first stumbled into her cave. She seemed to grow with every word she said, every ounce of

terror she wrought from the demigods before her. Now, choking on her tears, dissolving in her own poison, she was shrinking. Her aura was evaporating as she was dying, and by the gods if it wasn't addicting.

Never had he torn down his enemies with such violent and twisted intent. He'd always been fighting as fair as he could—cheap tricks and things that required too much of his power stayed out of his repertoire. Why? If this is what fighting with his full potential felt like, why would he ever hold back again?

Percy stood there, for gods know how long, just relishing the sensation that came with the poison. It had been eons. It had been milliseconds. He'd been lost in it for an eternity, yet it wasn't nearly long enough. It was so rough and abrasive, but pushed against the sharp, jagged pieces of that shattered ice Percy had broken, they smoothed down into nice, round edges.

It occurred to him that he shouldn't be this spaced out and at ease in Tartarus.

It occurred to him that he was standing in the middle of a lake of poison, *his* poison, and he could continue to do so for as long as he liked.

Percy spaced out some more.

He didn't stop until Akhlys' remains were indistinguishable from the poison he'd melted her with. He could feel it, the last remnants of her power evaporating. He wasn't quite sure where they went. *Maybe I took it too far*, he thought. As Misery evaporated, so did her Death Mist. Percy was solid again.

No Death Mist, no safe passage to the Doors.

And then he remembered he wasn't alone—he remembered what he was fighting for. The reason he held back, restrained his destructive power every time he went into battle. Annabeth.

He turned to voice his concern to her. "Hey—" Except the opening to the cave was empty. Annabeth wasn't there. "What...?" His first thought was that he'd been so distracted he missed her being killed. But there was no gold dust anywhere, and no body, no blood, no remains.

He would have felt it if she touched the poison.

She left. Briefly, while torturing Akhlys, Percy heard something shout at him, scream, plead his name. He had thought it was the poison, pushing him forward. Maybe it had been Annabeth, trying to pull him back. But he couldn't have stopped, not when it felt so right.

That might have cost him Annabeth. After everything, all they had to fight against to be together again, he had scared her away.

She *left* him.

Maybe he could fix this. Get to the Doors, meet her there. Talk to her. Sure, he may have gone a bit overboard, but it wasn't anything Akhlys wasn't planning to do herself.

Yeah. Yeah, he could fix this.

He filled his drakonhide waterskin with some poison. Once they talked, it would be okay. She'd realize that he was just surviving, the only way he knew how: to be the strongest. Stronger than your enemies and stronger than your allies, so you could protect the ones you love while decimating those you don't.

He picked up Riptide from where he had dropped it into the poison—the liquid tingled against his skin, but otherwise it felt exactly like water. Riptide must have thought so too; it was virtually unscathed. The only hint it had been dropped in something corrosive enough to disintegrate a goddess was a black discoloration from the tip to the middle of the blade. Weapon and poison in hand, he turned toward the entrance of the cave. He'd catch up, and they'd talk, and then they'd get out. It would be okay.

"You came all this way, it would be a shame for you to leave so soon."

The cliff behind him, the one that dropped into nothingness and oblivion and *Chaos*, should not have allowed anyone to sneak up on him from that direction, and yet, naturally, the moment Percy turned his back, someone snuck up on him from that direction. Thank you, Tartarus, for how consistently awful and weird everything is, if absolutely nothing else.

Percy turned around and saw no one. And then he focused, and his eyes began to adjust from the murky red lighting behind him to the darkness of the infinite void before him, and he saw a faint outline. It had no physical features that he could see. Everything but a misty, vaguely humanoid outline was indistinguishable from the darkness of the abyss. Sometimes, it flickered: there one moment, gone the next,

as if it became the dark before taking form again.

"I was..." Percy didn't like the idea of telling this being that Annabeth was alone. It hadn't tried to kill him yet, despite the who-knows-how-long it had been watching him, but that meant nothing down here. He would talk to it, see if he could get any information, and then leave or fight. "My friends. I think they left me here."

"Your friends?" The darkness asked.

"A demigod and a Titan," Percy replied. "We came here for Akhlys's Death Mist."

"A service she seems unable to provide now." Percy got the distinct vibe of a quirked eyebrow. "Quite the little godkiller, aren't you?"

The title burned cold in his veins, but Percy ignored it. He scratched the back of his head sheepishly. "Yeah, I..." What was he going to say, that he *liked* torturing the goddess? 'Godkiller,' indeed. "I have no excuse."

"But you do, don't you?" Percy cocked his head to the side, questioning. "You were surviving. If there's anything in Tartarus that anyone respects, it's the ability to endure and adapt, to grow stronger with each trial that comes your way."

"I don't think An—my friends saw it that way. I think I scared them."

"Then they are too weak to survive this place. Fear will earn you nothing but death. Only the strong survive, and only the strongest escape."

That sounded almost like advice. "Are you helping me?"

The darkness was silent for long enough that Percy thought he'd fucked up. And then it hummed. "Yes, it seems I am."

"Why?"

"There are only two ways to experience things here in the Pit: the first, as the strong, those who have both the will and the power to survive; the second, as the weak, those who hide from the strong in fear of the day they are caught and killed. I have seen a great many things in my eons, Perseus Jackson, but none so impossible as a demigod who has killed as many as you survive Tartarus long enough to escape." The darkness drifted closer to him, as if taking a better



look.

“Your kind, so commonly sneered at for being weak, only half meant for this world and yet twice as vulnerable, was never meant to come to this place, much less survive it. And I survive it too easily. All know the consequences of turning their bloodlust on me. Quite simply put, I am growing bored of this fixed existence. Some excitement will do the Pit good.”

“So you’re saying I’m strong enough to live and cool enough to watch?” The darkness chuckled. It was menacing at first, how the ominous noise danced off the cave walls and echoed around him, surrounding him like an amused army.

And then it replied, “Succinctly put, little godling. Be strong, and survival will come easily to you. Be ruthless, and you will find yourself growing quickly. Be smart, and your escape is all but assured.”

“Thank you.” Percy didn’t often find himself bowing to immortals—they were too full of themselves and annoying to earn his respect. But this one...this one had helped him more than anyone else had yet in Tartarus. It gave him a roadmap to survival. It gave him a roadmap home. And it could probably squash him like a bug with less than a thought. So Percy found himself in a low bow before turning away.

“You’re very welcome, little godkiller. Might I offer my assistance once more?”

“Really?” There was no answer. Percy quickly corrected himself. “Uh, I’d be honored.”

“Here in the dark with me is the Mansion of Night. Should you survive it, it will deliver you to the Pit’s Heart.”

“Should I *survive*—this is a test, isn’t it?” A smile wrapped itself around Percy and nudged him closer to the edge. “What do I do?”

“Step off, of course.” Percy blinked. “I will catch you, and I will take you to the Mansion. After that, all you need to do is make it through.”

“Are you sure this is allowed?” Percy asked, peering over the edge at what Akhlys had said was straight up Chaos. They’d fallen for...gods, days, probably, before landing in Tartarus. Stepping off a cliff above Chaos, though...would he ever stop falling?

The dark laughed. "Of course it is, child. The Mansion of Night is mine."

Percy paused. "But that makes you—"

"Yes?" Its amusement was palpable, dancing around him and urging him forward. Percy was talking to Night. Capital N Night, the reason anyone with any sense had a healthy fear of the dark. And it wanted Percy to walk off a cliff.

Well, fuck it. He'd done stupider things for worse reasons before. Percy walked off the cliff. Nyx hadn't lied; it held him aloft instead of letting him fall. A light breeze in his hair was the only thing telling him they were moving. Before long, they stopped, and Percy felt something solid beneath his feet.

"We're here," Night said. "Are you ready?"

"So I just...walk through?"

"Yes. It is a straight path to the Heart, where the Doors are." Percy took a step forward, but a chill going down his neck stopped him. "The weak would see the darkness inside and lose their minds," Nyx said. "However, the strong will thrive in the dark. Even though you are strong, godkiller, don't blink. Blink and you may lose yourself in the dark forever."

"Thank you," Percy said. Gods, he hoped it wasn't a long way through. Just thinking of not blinking made him want to do it.

"Strength be with you, young one. Now go," it encouraged. Percy stepped into the Mansion of Night.

From the outside, the Mansion had been the same shade as Nyx and the darkness surrounding them. Percy knew the moment he crossed the threshold, because the darkness curled in on itself and became alive. Looking out from Akhlys's cave, Percy had been sure he'd never see anything darker than the abyss. Now, he knew that even as strong as he was, true dark would haunt him forever.

Only the feel of his feet hitting the floor convinced Percy they still existed and hadn't dissolved into the night around him—convinced him that *he* still existed. It would be brighter behind his eyelids if he blinked, but Night's warning echoed in his head and he kept his burning eyes open.

How long had he been walking? Seconds? Millennia? Perhaps, as a son of Poseidon, he didn't need to blink, and he had been in here for decades, ever so slowly inching towards the exit. His heart was beating in his ears. His stinging eyes were watering. The inky black void stretched infinitely before him.

Percy pushed onward. His heart beat louder, seeming to shake the black around him. Only when he started to feel the heartbeat in his feet did he realize it wasn't his. Nyx had said the Doors were at the Heart. He was close.

He broke into a run. Tartarus' Heart. The Doors. Annabeth. *Home*. He was almost there. The air began to brighten around him. Soon, it changed to a dark crimson, the poisonous air of Tartarus bleeding into the pitch black of the void. Percy could see.

He blinked.

Immediately he slammed into a wall. When he opened his eyes, the crimson was gone. The darkness stretched out in every direction, thick and deep and unforgiving. No. *No*, surely he'd been out. He had *seen* it! The light—there was no way that would be inside the Mansion.

Percy felt the wall before him, hands desperately searching for—gods, something, anything. A handle to open the door that would surely reveal the red of Tartarus's atmosphere. A switch to turn on a light. A window to crawl out of.

But he could no longer feel the Heart. All around him, the void was still. The only movement came from him, the only sound his breaths. Not even his palm on the wall made any noise. He was all but blind and deaf in Night's Mansion.

Percy screwed his eyes shut in frustration and ran a hand through his hair. How was he supposed to find the way out now? When he went to put it back and lean against the wall, he almost toppled over.

The wall was gone.

Nyx's voice echoed in his ears and all around him. *Blink and you may lose yourself in the dark forever...*

Fuck! He'd done it again, and the Mansion had moved around him. At this point in time, 3 realizations came to him at once:

1. He was lost in the Mansion of Night.

2. The Mansion of Night was fucking confusing.
3. The Mansion of Night, in that regard, was similar to the Labyrinth.

Which—Percy had navigated the Labyrinth before. Sure, back then he'd had a clear-sighted mortal, but that had been important mostly because back then, he could see. That was fine. He didn't need to see. He just needed...

He needed to stop blinking. He couldn't get anywhere if his surroundings changed themselves every time his eyes closed. The question was, how do you not blink? People blinked for a reason—if your eyes dried up they would explode or something. Maybe he should have paid more attention in anatomy.

Wait a second.

No way. It could not be that easy. Your eyes needed moisture. The longer you kept them open for, the more they would water. He was the son of fucking *Poseidon*. Was it that easy?

It was worth a shot. Percy stared out into the darkness, wondering how it was so three-dimensional when it was just black. He stared, and strained his eyes, and eventually they started to sting and water again. Percy imagined the tears just...staying put. Instead of flowing down his cheeks, they pooled around his eyelashes and above, right in his eye.

It was odd. Almost like putting in eyedrops. It certainly wasn't comfortable, but it was manageable. It was doable. Percy didn't need to blink.

That was fantastic. One problem down. Next problem: where was he, and how was he supposed to get out?

Could he use his poison somehow? Riptide? He uncapped his sword, but even the soft glow it gave off was muted. Either the part discolored by the poison didn't glow with the rest of it, or it was just so dark that didn't matter anyway.

Percy sighed deeply, and a fit of coughs tore through him, like every time he forgot where he was and tried to breathe normally. Gods damn it all, he coughed so hard he closed his eyes again. Honestly, just fuck the stupid, poisonous air down here, constantly trying to kill him even when—poisonous.

The air was poisonous. It was toxic. It was meant to *maim* and *injure*

and *kill*. Right now, it was just inconvenient, what with Percy now being somewhere completely different in the Mansion than before, but maybe he could make it helpful.

Maybe he could control the poison in the air. Or at least feel it, so it could lead him out. Percy reached with senses he hadn't known he possessed, and the air responded. It danced around, showing him the general shape of the room. The exits, he knew, were just ahead of him and to his right; the faint vacuum of the openings sucked the air towards them, and he could feel the corridors expanding beyond.

Percy stretched further. The Mansion sprawled out like a maze, and Percy was everywhere at once. In the center, where the air was cold and thin and *clean*; in the lower levels, where it was cool and damp and smelled of blood; in the—there. To his left. The air was just barely trembling in time with a heartbeat, and it wasn't Percy's. He started moving towards it.

*Impressive*, Night whispered in his ear. Of course it had been watching him. This was a test.

Percy kept going, never blinking, never stopping as he followed his senses toward the exit. The air became more toxic the closer he got, but Percy didn't mind. It just made his senses stronger, his control over it more absolute.

The faintest flickers of crimson crept into his peripheral vision. Percy kept walking.

He was back on track. The crimson began to bleed from a deep pomegranate to a brilliant scarlet to the color of blood. The heartbeat of Tartarus shook the ground. Percy was close, but he'd learned his lesson. No blinking until his feet were on solid ground.

Percy ran. He ran for hours and weeks and eternities and not even if the Heart was only a few seconds away was it soon enough. He was almost home. He was almost to Annabeth.

*Now jump*. As soon as Night's voice whispered in his head, Percy leapt.

He hit the ground with more force than he'd thought he would. Rolling to keep the impact from jarring his ankles and knees too much, he tumbled to a stop. The ground underneath him was unpleasantly spongy and moist. The air was humid, and Percy could feel the liquid in it, bonded with whatever toxic substance made the atmosphere down here so polluted.

He blinked. When he opened his eyes, his surroundings hadn't changed.

The ground pulsed beneath him. Percy picked himself up and turned around. The abyss behind him gave him a full view of Chaos where it roiled and frothed down below, but the Mansion was invisible to him.

An ear-shattering *fwoom!* from behind him caught Percy's attention. Something was happening deeper within the Heart. The sky flickered with black and white lightning before calming, and the noise died down until only the *buh-bump* of Tartarus' Heart remained.

Percy started running. Annabeth might be in trouble.

Percy had long since figured out that everywhere he looked in Tartarus was part of the dark god's body, and this just drove the knowledge home. The Heart was a huge muscle, embedded in the ground, pulsing and throbbing beneath his feet.

The ground sank under his feet almost like it was trying to slow him down. The air grew thicker and hazier the farther he went, and Percy had to squint to see anything with any clarity. He tumbled forward, wobbling on his feet when the ground pulsed under him, accompanied by the near-deafening beating of the Heart.

He was so close. The lightning had been just past this mound. He just had to make it a bit farther.

Percy crested the hill. His heart stopped.

Distantly, he noted the irony; his heart stuttering as it did while he stood on Tartarus's own steadily beating one.

To be fair, anyone in his position would probably react the same way. Percy had been so relentless in trying to get back to Annabeth that he didn't even stop to consider why he hadn't found her yet—he'd taken a different route, so it hadn't crossed his mind. They were both going to the same place. Percy should arguably have beaten her there—she had a head start, but he'd taken a shortcut. (Surely, *surely*, he hadn't stayed in Akhlys' cave, in Night's Mansion, for *that* long.) Realistically, he should have made it to the Heart first, or at least happened upon her sooner.

Well, it was clear why, now.

On a long, flat, fleshy expanse laid a sandstorm's worth of golden

monster dust, and in a clearing in the middle of it were four broken lengths of thick black chain, each fixed to the ground on one end. There were no Doors in sight. Just a figure standing next to what looked like an empty door frame. As he got closer, he realized it was Bob.

Just Bob, and no Doors.

Annabeth had left him in Tartarus. He was alone, in Hell, and he had no way out. He was going to die here.

## Tear it Down

Why? Why would Annabeth leave him? Did he scare her? Did she think that Misery was going to kill him, so she ditched and went ahead? Gods, Percy had enough questions to fill a library's worth of books, and he wouldn't be getting answers anytime soon.

He had to get Bob and then get out of the open. Just standing here would make it easy for the monsters to scent him, and he had a giant he wanted to avoid. He pushed forward. Bob stood stiffly at the empty doorway, pushing the up button. His silver eyes were glazed over, and he was muttering to himself.

"Bob?" Percy asked. Small Bob's ears flicked at the call, but Bob just twitched and kept staring into space. Percy couldn't make out what he was muttering, but it was clearly Ancient Greek. "Bob? Come on, man, we gotta get outta here."

Small Bob flicked Bob with its ear. In reply, the muttering increased in volume. Percy could hear a few things, now, and he could say with certainty he didn't like any of it.

*"...half-blood of the Eldest Gods..."*

"Bob, snap out of it." Percy shook his shoulder.

*"...Titan's curse one must withstand..."*

"We're in danger here, man." Percy raised his voice. "We need to move."

*"...betrayed by one who calls you a friend..."*

A chill went up Percy's spine. Why was Bob repeating his prophecies? Why was Bob repeating *that line*? Why was he repeating *that line, here*, where the number of friends Percy had was dwindling to almost nothing?

A clear, loud *ding!* swept through the air. Bob's hand fell from the button, and the doorway vanished. Slowly, Bob's eyes began to clear. Small Bob leapt from his place on his shoulders and started hissing.

Percy backed away. "Bob?"



“Your ‘Bob’ is *dead*, Perseus Jackson,” the Piercer growled, meeting his eyes, “and soon, you will be too.”

He’d forgotten how *fast* Iapetus was. Percy just barely parried the first strike. “Y’know, I hear that a lot.” He dodged as Iapetus swept his spear at his legs.

“Perhaps,” Iapetus grunted, ripping his spear out of the rock he just impaled, “this is the last time you will hear it. Perhaps, I will have better luck: Mortality is my domain, and you are very mortal.”

Oh. Right. Percy had forgotten about that—but to be fair, the last time he faced Bob—er, Iapetus, he had already been dying, slowly and painfully. Little things like whether or not the Titan had acted as death before Death was born were easy to overlook.

“Gods, I hope not,” Percy muttered, ducking a swing just in time. He poured his focus into the fight and stopped trying to come up with petty insults to throw in the Titan’s face. He knew how Iapetus worked in a fight—he was all Bob with no mercy. Insults would get him nothing.

“There are no gods down here, boy.” And yeah, true, but Percy had more important things to think about besides what turn of phrase to use when. “Perhaps, when I am finished with you, I will find the daughter of Athena and *thank her* for killing ‘Bob’.”

“She—no.” Killing—no, no, Iapetus was lying. He had to be. How would she even have done it? Percy saw red. No one threatened Annabeth at him and lived.

“He came here to help her.” Dodge. “She wouldn’t bring him through the Doors with her. Said he had to get her out.” Percy lunged and managed a thin slice across Iapetus’ arm as he backed away. “He didn’t *want* to live anymore. Not with his friends gone.”

He ducked and rolled, intent on coming up behind Iapetus and hopefully stabbing him in the back, but he collided with something on the ground. Wildly, he lashed out—whatever other monster tried to join the fight would be killed by the blow.

A feral yowl froze him in place long enough for the Titan to stab Percy in the side with his spear. (*Hades, it burned, but not more than he did when he realized what he’d done.*)

Small Bob.

He'd grown, a full-sized sabre-toothed tiger ready for battle, but Percy watched him shrink again and crawl away from the fight.

Percy needed to end this fight *quickly*. He snapped off the tip of the spear that stuck out of his stomach and yanked himself off of the shaft. Bo—Iapetus growled, but pushed harder, like he was all for death by blunt force trauma instead of stabbing.

He probably was, so long as the death was Percy's.

And Percy's death would be soon if he couldn't kill the Titan. He was already slowing down, the pain in his side slowly radiating out as the adrenaline cleared and his heart slowed. He really needed to put pressure on this wound.

Percy ducked the broken end of the spear and rolled, slicing at the Titan's ankles. When all else failed, he knew he could go for ankles and get results. The Titan bellowed, and Percy took the brief moment of distraction and used it to slash at his other leg, cutting it off at the knee.

Another roar.

Percy threw a hand out, and his poison followed, flying from the flask at his waist and burrowing into the Titan's skin.

Iapetus didn't get to react to that one, because Riptide's black tip was already poking out of his throat.

A storm of gold dust exploded outward from the Titan. Percy immediately turned and ran to Small Bob. "No, no, no, *no, no*," he muttered, kneeling at the *spartus*'s side. He stared at the bloody gash running down the tiger kitten's flank. "You can't—I didn't mean...." He did this. It—it was an accident, but...Percy *did this*.

Small Bob mewled pitifully and glanced at him warily. Percy's hands were shaking too hard to try and touch him without causing him more pain. There was nothing he could do.

No. No, he'd thought that in Akhlys's cave, and now here he was, able to control poison. In the back of his mind, he was aware of it crawling back into its flask, task completed. Maybe—maybe he could do it with blood too. Maybe he could *fix* Small Bob. Percy rested a trembling hand on the wound and Small Bob growled.

"No, no, *shhhh*—I'm trying to *help*," Percy pleaded. He squeezed his

eyes shut, partially so he could ignore his tears, because Small Bob was *not dying*—and he felt it. His fur was matted with it, and it was still coming. Every heartbeat pushed more and more of it out, and it *ached*. Percy could feel how close Small Bob was to death, how little blood was where it was supposed to be.

He took a deep, shuddering breath and pushed it back where it was supposed to go. He pushed in time with Small Bob's fading heart beat, and when his pulse grew too faint, Percy *forced* it to beat faster.

*Bump. Bump. Bump. Bump.* Steadily beating in time with Percy's own slowing heart.

It wasn't working. Percy could keep this up forever, if he had the strength, but he couldn't heal the cat. He could poison him, stab him with Riptide, *kill* him in any number of ways, but Percy couldn't *heal*. What *good* was he to his friends if he let them get injured—*injured them himself*—and couldn't *heal* them afterwards?

He let go of Small Bob's heart. The *spartus* soundlessly dissolved into golden dust, indistinguishable from the Titan's remains.

Percy stayed kneeling, stayed crying, and stayed furious with himself. He killed Small Bob. The only ally he might have had left, the only companion he could have kept close, and he fucking gutted him.

Maybe he should just let himself bleed out here. Grant Iapetus his last wish. Let the Titan of Mortality claim whatever title or reward he'd inevitably get for killing Percy. He'd die someday, that much was cold hard fact, so why not today?

He never did get to contemplate the pros and cons of letting it all end.

The back of his head exploded in pain while his vision exploded into stars. A dark face flashed in front of his eyes, a *beautiful* face, one he *knew*, one he *couldn't quite place*—and then everything went dark.

In the blackness was a calm peace that Percy knew by heart. Demigod dreams always started slowly, always began with a dull quiet. The world felt hazy, but in his core he knew it was real, was happening or would happen or had happened. The hypersensitivity came with the fog—pain didn't exist in these dreams, instead replaced with a kind of pressure.

The pulsing in his head told Percy he'd be in trouble when he woke up.

He was standing in an underground cavern. Shadows danced across the ceiling, making it impossible to tell how tall it was. It was high enough to fit a giant, shrouded in the same shadows from the waist up. Hazel and Leo danced around the thing, slashing at it and blasting it with fire. Nothing seemed to do much good. A woman stood beside the giant, throwing some kind of magic at his friends.

A different woman Percy had never met before was standing back and watching the fight with a bored gaze. Probably a goddess, then. Behind the fight, a set of elevator doors resembling those to Olympus with inverted colors shook and dinged.

The woman beside the giant grinned and said something. In response, Leo turned and lobbed a screwdriver at the elevator, smacking the button and opening the doors. Annabeth fell out, shivering and bloody.

The scene changed. It was the same cavernous room, empty of everyone but the Seven—minus him, plus Nico—and the goddess. The demigods were crouched around Annabeth, tending to her wounds. “Where’s Percy?” Hazel asked, face streaked with tears.

Annabeth took a shuddering breath. “She killed him,” she whimpered. “Akhlys killed him.” Nico furrowed his brows and opened his mouth, but Annabeth caught his gaze and shook her head. He gave her a look that clearly said, *we’ll talk later*, but stayed quiet.

The goddess stared straight at him, something unreadable on their face as they looked him up and down.

If Percy had been corporeal in his dream, he’d have had the breath knocked out of him. Annabeth was lying. Before, it was a possibility—likely, even—that she thought he was dead, but she silenced Nico before he could correct her. She knew he was alive, and she left him in Tartarus.

On purpose.

He vaguely noted the group shadow-traveling out, but the dream didn’t matter now. The room shook and collapsed on him, but he barely noticed. He didn’t want to know what happened next, he didn’t want to know what other lies Annabeth would tell.

Oh, gods. The only constant he’d had since he woke up in the woods by the Wolf House was his memories of Annabeth, as muted and hazy as they were. All he knew at that point was that he loved her, and she

loved him. His motivation from that point on had always been to get back to her. Nothing was more important. Nothing.

Tartarus was manageable with her here, because he had a mission. Keep Annabeth alive. Now, not only was he alone and directionless, but the one person he trusted above all others just...left him here.

Percy woke slowly, convinced someone was pummeling his head with a hammer and crushing his heart with their fist. Vaguely, he noted the net he was tangled in, but he didn't quite care.

Annabeth left him here. On purpose. She *betrayed* him.

Bob was gone. Iapetus had regained his mind.

Small Bob was dead. Percy had slaughtered him.

He was alone.

Alone in every way that mattered, but not completely alone—at that moment, Polybotes roared, “Ah, you’ve awoken!” The thundering of the giant’s voice invaded Percy’s ears and made him groan, which just made his headache worse. It hurt to think. It hurt to move. It hurt to open his eyes, but it hurt to close them, too.

It was just easier to say that nothing didn’t hurt.

At least it was warm. The heat felt nice on his wounds.

“The son of Poseidon, here in Tartarus.” Percy thought it sounded like Polybotes might be smiling, but Percy also thought he might be speaking into a megaphone right next to his ear, so he wasn’t too quick to trust his judgment on that one. “Too good to be true, and yet...”

Percy rolled onto his side and curled into a ball. Maybe he should just go along with whatever was going to happen. He’d clearly crossed some kind of line. Annabeth wouldn’t just leave him for no reason. Maybe he’d gone bad down here. *He killed Small Bob*. Maybe he’d gone too far. His powers—poison, blood—it couldn’t be natural.

The net moved, its weight lifted, and Percy debated just laying there and taking whatever came next. Maybe he deserved it, whatever painful death Polybotes would come up with. Besides, the giant couldn’t be killed without a god. He was too strong.

Percy closed his eyes and waited.

You know what?

Fuck that.

There was no reason to feel bad for using his powers. Percy was surviving. Anyone who could fault him for that was *weak*, and Percy knew what happened to the weak. They died painful deaths.

They weren't worth his time—couldn't be, because he'd lost too much already and he wouldn't risk losing anything else.

Percy wasn't weak. He knew that. He'd never thought about it too much, because he hadn't *cared* about being powerful, but it was just a fact of life. Water was wet. The sky was red. The air was made of toxic fumes. Percy Jackson was strong.

And Nyx had told him about the strong. The strong survive. The strong escape.

*Be strong, and survival will come easily to you.*

Percy braced against the pain in his head and side and pushed himself to his feet. He stumbled and Polybotes chuckled. "Well met, Sea Scum." He hefted his trident. "That you're standing at all is a true testament of your willpower."

Percy almost wished he had less willpower, just so he could stop and rest. "That you're standing at all is a testament to the fact that I have to kill you harder this time," he bit back. Polybotes laughed loudly and gestured to one of the cyclopes at his side.

The monster ambled forward, and Percy fumbled for his pen. Riptide sprang into existence, but by then the cyclops was too close. He took a step back and almost fell. There was a ledge behind him. The cyclops stepped forward and shoved Percy back, and then he was *falling*.

He had less than a second to panic and wonder why Polybotes wouldn't kill him himself before his fall was broken by something hot. Well, cold. Well, it was so hot it was cold, and Percy would have been relieved as his head and side stopped aching if the fire water around him wasn't so incredibly scalding he thought he was being boiled alive.

Gods, his lungs ached. He was being cooked from the inside out.

Polybotes was just frying him as an appetizer. Not even Mt. Saint Helens fucking *burned* this much.

And then something tugged at him, and Percy was fished from the Phlegethon. Polybotes shook out his net, and Percy tumbled to the ground, shivering and retching. "Warning next time, asshole," he croaked, gulping for breaths of normal-temperature air.

"Such ungratefulness," the giant frowned. "Well, if you would rather keep your wounds..." He swung the butt of his trident into Percy's ribs.

Tears pricked at his eyes. Percy wheezed. He tried to keep his chest still; no doubt that was a broken rib or two. That also meant unless he got thrown in again, or he could control it without the giant noticing, the Phlegethon was out of his reach.

"I told you, once, that I would turn your blood to poison," the giant said. "I thought being uninjured for the process would be a small mercy. Something even you don't give out, it seems."

"Hngh?" Percy grunted.

"You certainly let Misery suffer. Poetic, almost, that you will die much in the same way."

A gesture, and one of the cyclopes walked up to Percy. He tentatively fished in his pocket, but Riptide must still be in the Phlegethon somewhere. It was all Percy could do to keep from crying out as the monster took a sword and sliced down his side.

The gash went from his armpit to his hip, and with the way Polybotes was eyeing the incision, he would like what came next even less.

Polybotes looked him in the eye as he positioned the trident over the cut. "Well met, demigod, but this is the end."

A guttural scream tore at Percy's throat as the tip of the trident pushed into his wound. At its touch, the blood started to turn to poison, and it wasn't Percy's. Maybe if he focused, he could control it, but everything was a haze of pain. Percy could feel the poison entering his veins, could feel it fighting his blood, could feel it *taking over*. He poked at it with his mind, but nothing happened.

It was agony.

This was Polybotes' poison. He would have to fight for control of it, and Percy was in no shape to fight. He only had one option, and he prayed to anyone that was listening that it would work.

*There are no gods down here, boy,* Iapetus's voice taunted, whispering in his ear. Percy ignored it and prayed harder.

Delirious with pain, Percy reached, and the River answered. It shot from its riverbed, catching the trident and thrusting it away from him. The giant sputtered as the Phlegethon pummeled him in the face. At the same time, a small stream broke off and wrapped itself around his ribs.

The pain dimmed and Percy immediately commanded the poison to leave his blood. It trickled out and slithered down his arm, settling around his wrist like a bracelet. He'd lost his flask of poison when Polybotes knocked him out. This would have to do for now.

Percy rolled to his feet, retrieved Riptide from his pocket, and dropped the river. In one hand was his sword, black and bronze and gleaming in the red light. In the other, the poison, taken from his blood and wielded like a whip.

When Polybotes recovered and looked at Percy, he laughed. "I did not want to believe..."

Oh, didn't he? Well, time to make him a believer.

Percy threw his hand out, and the poison raced forward, and for the second time in rapid succession, Polybotes was smacked in the face by a high pressure stream. He sputtered and stumbled back, shaking a few basilisks from his head as he tried to regain his balance.

Venomous basilisks. Percy continued his assault on Polybotes, and while the giant was busy trying to stay upright, Percy drained the poison from the snakes. They dissolved with a hiss, and Percy threw their poison at the cyclopes surrounding Polybotes.

He hasn't gotten a good count before. Three of them, one with a bloody sword, and two with clubs. Their weapons dropped and they wailed as they dissolved, first with poison and then into dust.

Percy called his poison back to him and flourished his sword. Polybotes growled and opened his eyes; one was bright red and irritated, and the other barely opened. The skin around it was melted and smoking.



“Impressive,” the giant admitted. He picked up his trident and stepped back. “Perhaps...perhaps I will let you live, godkiller.” Percy stilled at the title. So far, he’d only heard that from one other being down here. Was word spreading, or had Night sold him out?

“What, too hard to kill me yourself?” Percy snapped. His poison floated in the air around him, taut and ready to strike.

“No.” Polybotes chuckled quietly, feeling at his eyes. “I was made to oppose your father, Sea Scum, and yet, down here, you bear more resemblance to me than him.” What resemblance? The poison? Or was Polybotes talking about something different? Something deeper inside him? “I hope you do escape this Pit,” the giant continued with a cruel grin. “Nothing I can do will hurt your father nearly as much as you will when he sees how far you’ve fallen.”

Damn, that stung. And Percy couldn’t even argue, because there was no fucking way Polybotes would let him live if that wasn’t true. Mind games weren’t his style—he wasn’t smart enough for them. Which meant that next time Percy saw his dad, the god would probably disown him on the spot.

What’s another loss, at this point? Percy wondered if he was numb to losing people he loved by now.

Percy wanted to fight, but while the Phlegethon healed his wounds, it didn’t take away all of his pain. He was barely standing. Percy and Polybotes stood, tense, considering each other, before Percy shakily sat down.

He pointed Riptide at the giant. “I see you again, you’re dead,” he told him.

The giant just bowed dramatically, adding insult to injury, then turned and walked away.

The sight of the giant’s back looked and sounded like the nail in the coffin of Percy’s family. Annabeth had left him. Bob and Small Bob were dead. Polybotes looked strangely proud, and he had to assume his dad would want nothing to do with him.

He couldn’t just go back to his Mom and Paul like this. At best, they wouldn’t understand why he’d changed so much. At worst, he might hurt them. Might kill them. His power was growing, and he’d stay in Tartarus forever before risking hurting his parents.

Percy needed somewhere to rest and plan out his next step. He was just sitting out in the open, his back to the Phlegethon, dead tired and in pain.

Where could he even go? Nowhere was safe. The Heart looked like the site of a massacre; Damasen had made his choice, bowed to fate, and stayed in his swamp; Misery's cave was—a decent idea, actually. On the one side was Nyx, so nothing could sneak up from that direction, and the other opening was blocked by poison.

It wasn't perfect, but it was as close to a safe place as he'd get down here.

Now, if only he could remember which way it was. He didn't even know which way he'd come from; Polybotes knocked him out cold and dragged him here. And how long had he been unconscious for? Polybotes could have walked the entire time he was out. There's no telling how far away he was.

Except, he'd already been far away from the Doors before. Last time, he and—they just followed the Rivers, because they flowed all the way down to the Heart. And if he made it to the Heart, he could backtrack and find the cave.

He had the plan. Now he just needed the energy to carry it out.

Just had to...get up. Start walking. Yeah. He could do that.

In a minute.

Just...just a minute. One minute of rest here.

One loud roar in the distance and a mini heart attack later saw Percy on the move. At some point, he grew too tired to keep the poison in his grip and let it fall.

Time had no meaning. It was just one step after the other, forever. He knew for certain he hadn't gone this long without being attacked since he got down here, though, so maybe word was spreading about Akhlys.

He split from the River once the air pulsed faintly in time with a Heart that wasn't Percy's, and soon after that he found the abyss. He was close.

Just a little bit more to go.

Just a few more steps.

Percy stumbled into the cave. The poison was a balm on his mind, and with the cover the cave provided, the tension bled from his body. He made it past the pool, a few paces from the cliff before he stopped and grabbed a stalagmite for balance. “Night!”

“Little Godkiller. You’re back.”

“The Doors of Death have been released. I have no way to get home, not now. Can I ask a favor?” Percy was going to have to ask it, one day, how it so clearly nodded its head without actually having a visible head. “Can I rest here? It won’t matter how strong I am if I fall asleep on my feet.”

The darkness curled around him, poked at his wounds and caressed his cheek. “A reasonable request. Yes, young one. Rest here, knowing you have my Blessing. I will watch over you as you sleep.”

Maybe Percy should have been on the look out for Meaningful Capital Letters, but he was too tired. Night had told him to rest, and it didn’t need to tell him twice. He all but collapsed at the mouth of the cave, only barely taking the time to mumble a thank you to Nyx for its hospitality.

And Percy slept, Blessed, under the watchful gaze of the Night.

He did not dream this time. *Small mercies*, Polybotes’ voice whispered to him as he floated towards consciousness.

Then a face—the same one, the beautiful one, the one *he knew from somewhere*—flashed before his eyes, and Percy shot up. His aching limbs groaned in protest and before Percy was even fully awake, he found himself in a defensive stance with Riptide gleaming dangerously in his grip.

Shit, look at him. Not even awake before grabbing a weapon. What would happen if his mom woke him up, or Paul? There was no question—he’d hurt them. He would. Whether it was because of what he’d experienced or if that was who he was now wasn’t important. The important part was, they weren’t safe around him.

And was it even worth leaving if he was a danger to his family? Whatever care he’d had for Annabeth had been ripped from its place in his heart and smothered in hurt and betrayal and bitterness, but he still cared about his parents. They were mortals—they couldn’t fight

back as effectively as a demigod could, and if Annabeth's reaction was anything to go by, the demigods would fear him.

He'd already thought it, twice. When he killed Small Bob and when he'd fought Polybotes. Was it worth leaving? Should he just let himself die down here, to protect those he loved, those who loved him, ever-dwindling as they were? If he just let the next monster he met beat him to death...

The face—

*Death.*

"I know how to leave," Percy realized. "Holy—Nyx! I know how to get out!" He laughed in disbelief. It was a terrible idea. It was risky and dangerous and he might not survive but how was that any different from anything else down here? How was it any different from any of his plans in the past?

Nyx joined him on the cliff, interest apparent and *gods, how did it do that without a face?* "And how will you do that, young one?"

Percy whirled to face the abyss. "I need to die." Night was quiet. "Almost die." The silence continued. "Basically die, but also sort of... not?" Perhaps he should explain. "Before I came down here, I had a quest. Death was trapped and I helped free him. Theoretically, that means he owes me, right?"

"My son is honorable. I'm sure he would grant a favor."

"Great, so—your son." Percy blinked. "I forgot about that part." Amusement surrounded him, followed by a low chuckle. Night was *laughing at him. Rude.* "The point is, he *should* help. The Doors of Death are his, so if I die, just long enough to talk to him, then he can give me a lift out, right?"

"And how will you ensure your death is not permanent?"

Percy had a plan for that too. Only half of which he was going to share with Night: either his death is permanent, and he's taken to the Judgement Pavilion, or... "Poison. It'll just about kill me, but then I can control it. I can make it stop."

"You can't use the poison behind you," Nyx pointed out. And, no, he couldn't. Percy could feel it, how that poison was his and his alone; how even if he tried, he couldn't make it hurt him. No, his poison

could only ever help him.

Finding a suitable source of poison might be a good idea.

“I guess I could find Polybotes again, if I have to,” Percy mused.

“Again?” And Percy found himself telling Night just how he came to be so injured and exhausted when he’d come back to her. He spent some time marveling at its featureless expressions, while it spent some time marveling at the demigod before it.

And when he finished, it merely replied, “I see,” before falling silent again. Eventually, it spoke again. “I may know of a more...reliable source of poison,” it said. “Polybotes seems a volatile character.”

“What’s more reliable than a giant that sneezes and drops poisonous snakes?”

“Ah, but that information comes with a price,” Night replied.

Percy froze.

He’d gotten too comfortable with the primordial. It was the only being in Tartarus he’d been able to talk to, to have a *not-horrible* conversation with, and that lured Percy into a false sense of security. Now he was about to pay for it.

His hand brushed his pocket as he tried to figure out if he’d even be able to fight Night, non-corporeal and powerful as it was, or if he should just bolt.

Nyx laughed. “Such a hostile reaction, young one. All I ask is you do not depart immediately.” Percy turned to look at it—or, well, in its general direction. “Strong as you are, you may not survive the journey. There are things I can teach you that can guarantee your success.”

And that was confusing. The only one looking out for Percy—the only one in the entire world, right now—was him. Why would Nyx want to ensure his survival? How did it stand to benefit?

“Why?” A head tilt without a visible head prompted him to go on. “The strong survive. The weak don’t. You don’t care for others because they *make* you weak. You don’t help anyone without gaining help in return. That’s how Tartarus works. So *why* are you so intent on keeping me alive?”

“Is it so hard to believe I’ve grown fond of you, little godling?”

“The truth,” Percy pushed.

“The truth...” Night hummed. “The truth, godkiller...perhaps I have not grown so fond of *you* rather than the company you provide.” Ah.

“It seems the loneliness has caught up with me. And I believe I have found a solution fit for both of us.” Nyx paused.

He’d found a way out, and he wouldn’t let Nyx keep him here. If he had to fight to get out...Percy reached for his poison—

“You are capable of killing Gaea.”

—and let it go again. Had he heard it right? “What?”

“Given time and training first, of course. And when she dies, she will come here.”

“To keep you company,” Percy realized. The abyss before him nodded. “How long will it take?”

Nyx chuckled. “Time and Tartarus do not mix, young one. But I will ensure your departure in time to fight in your war.”

Percy barely heard the word slip from his lips. “Okay.” And just like that, training began.

Time and Tartarus do not mix. He could have trained with Nyx for hours. He could have stayed for months. It made him nervous, at first. In the past, time acting different than it should always meant Kronos was near.

He could still remember it: injuries happening so fast he didn’t even know he was being attacked; time slowing around him until Percy felt like he was running through jelly. The worst moments of the previous war stretched on for hours, while the best lasted mere seconds.

The realization that Kronos *technically could* be nearby hadn’t helped his nerves.

But Percy had learned a lot since facing the Titan last. Let Kronos come. Akhlys wasn’t enough; Percy was dying for another round of practice.

Training with Nyx certainly came close. It lured monsters to the cave

constantly, so he could keep sword fighting while learning. Soon, his poison began to feel like an extension of himself. He collected tidbits of information from the primordial, learned things that he wouldn't have been taught at Camp even if someone knew them.

"Domain is important," Night said once. "All else will inevitably fail you, but your domain never will. It chose you, and you chose it."

"I'm not a god, Nyx, I don't have a domain."

"Then how do you explain your connection with poison?" Percy bit his lip and shrugged. "Domain," Nyx repeated simply. "It may be unprecedented in a mortal, but something tells me your fate will never be restrained by something so feeble as precedent."

On learning he'd been able to control the Rivers, Night doubled down on training. He'd be summoning different types of liquids from miles away at a moment's notice. A hellhound would come close to the cave, and Nyx would request, "Archeron." In no time at all, the monster would howl in pain, its agony mirroring that of the River, and dissolve.

Even Kelli reformed again before he left. This time, Night remained silent as a high speed dart of Lethe water smacked the empousa in the back of the head. Percy had enough time to see the hate and recognition fade from her eyes before he stuck Riptide through her gut.

Blood...blood, he kept to himself. He had no doubt Nyx could help him increase his control, but he needed an ace up his sleeve. Something no one knew about. A secret weapon, almost.

Training with poison and the Rivers continued, until Percy woke up from one of his cat naps to Night humming. It was a beautiful tune: soft, and ancient, and melancholy.

"Night?" He asked.

It stopped humming. "Ah, you've awoken."

Nyx stayed silent as Percy got up and stretched. "What's up?" He asked.

"It is time." Percy froze. Excitement and fear and longing and hesitation warred in him. He was finally leaving Tartarus. He was finally going *home*. "Your ship is nearing Athens. The giants await

their arrival eagerly; their blood is to be used to wake Gaea.”

“And when she does wake, I’ll kill her,” Percy agreed.

“The poison you seek is in a forest not far from here. In it reside my children, the Keres.”

A pause from Percy. “Well, this should turn out great. They already don’t like me.”

A raised eyebrow from Nyx. “Oh?” And, well, surely they had time for a quick run-through of that quest.

“I think, godkiller, that you will never cease to surprise,” it told him after he finished. “Simply walk straight out from the cave until you reach the River of Fire, and follow it downstream. You will know you are close when you reach the place the River Phlegethon and the River Styx meet. Soon after that, you will reach their residence.”

“Thank you, Nyx.” For the second time since he’d known it, Percy bowed to the Night. It had earned his respect, and perhaps even more impressive down in Tartarus, his trust.

“Go, hero,” Night replied. Percy didn’t look back, and Nyx didn’t look away as its Blessed disappeared into the angry red fog.

His journey to the Keres had begun.

Let it be known that Percy *did not* space out while trekking through Tartarus. He thought of nothing but his mission. Night’s directions played on repeat in his mind as he hiked across the rugged terrain.

Despite having a rough sense of where he was going, Tartarus wasn’t making it easy on him. Sometimes he’d close his eyes for a second and be ten feet away from where he thought he was. Sometimes, his surroundings would morph, dancing around him as he tried to make sense of them. Sometimes he’d be convinced he was looking down at his body from behind, only to blink and remember himself.

It got better once he reached the Phlegethon. He kept the River to his left as he walked, stopping periodically to down some fire water.

He’d not yet reached the intersection of the Phlegethon and the Styx, but the terrain around him flattened out and dark, twisted mimics of trees grew from the ground. Apparently, he was at least getting close.



The Phlegethon was no longer running through a ravine. Its shores gently sloped upward to the forest, and the farther he walked, the closer the trees grew to the riverbank. Percy picked up the pace. The trees provided good cover from monsters, but it provided it *for* monsters, too.

He didn't want to be caught by surprise.

Percy was listening for anything signaling danger. Something else, though, caught his ear, very soon after the beginning of the forest. Up ahead, the waters of the Phlegethon crashed violently with another River. He knew that River—the water was grey, and polluted, and Percy could already feel the anger and despair rolling off from it in waves. Nyx had said he'd see the Rivers meet when he was getting close, so, his trek must be coming to an end.

Percy raised his guard. He needed to be ready for anything.

He hadn't been walking long before something happened.

A twig snapped behind him. Percy whirled around, Riptide already out, and scanned his surroundings. A dark, rasping laugh set the hairs on the back of his neck standing on edge. Where had it come from?

The laugh again, and Percy looked up. In the trees, dozens of them.

He hadn't found the Keres. Not yet.

He'd found the *arai*.

"We've been looking forward to this," the demon in front croaked.

Percy adjusted his grip on Riptide. "Oh?"

"We had received word from our sisters that the son of Poseidon was in Tartarus," it replied. "And our curses have waited for so long to find their way home."

Riptide came up in a defensive grip. He did not want to fight these things. "I killed your sisters," he warned. "You don't want to be next."

"Oh, but that is our purpose, Perseus Jackson," another one snarled. "We live and die by our curses. Now, so will you!" An *arai* dove toward him, barely a blur. It was all Percy could do to swing Riptide in time. The demon crowed joyously as it disintegrated.

Riptide was ripped from his hands. The hairs on his neck stood on end

as the wind whispered to him. *Every time you raise your blade in battle, it hissed, every time you hope for success, you will feel my curse.*

Ares.

The *arai* were between him and his sword. He couldn't get to it without being shredded. Behind him was the Phlegethon, but that water healed. He didn't want that. The curses closed in, cackling and snarling at him. He was trapped.

*Be ruthless, and you will find yourself growing quickly.*

He could do that.

Percy had something he needed to test out, anyway. Small Bob hadn't been great practice. He had been trying to *heal* him.

These, though. Percy was going to tear them apart.

Finding their blood was trivial. Taking hold of it was laughable. Percy zeroed in on his anger. His own blood boiled with it—anger, rage, betrayal, grief. All the emotions he didn't let himself feel on the surface, because these emotions could *kill*.

He set his anger free with a shout; it didn't just kill, it eviscerated. The *arai* closest to him were immediately blown apart, golden remains falling like snow. The wave of damage spread outwards: the ones behind the closest began to wither away, and the ones behind them were blown backward, thrown into the twisted and gnarled trees and falling to the ground with cries of anguish.

The demons tried to reach him, tried to fight back. Those that hadn't disintegrated were being dragged down to the ground by their blood. They didn't stand a chance. "Our curses! Take our curses!" The *arai* wailed.

"I'm not killing you," Percy argued, "your blood is. So why don't you take the curses?"

The pained shrieking increased tenfold. One *ara* spontaneously combusted; another had its ear ripped off, and Percy winced. The Minotaur's curse; that could have been bad. All around him, *arai* were dying in ways Percy recognized, ways he'd killed monsters before. And the few that didn't—the one that looked like it'd been punched in the face, the one that had only sneezed violently, the one that lost its eyes—Percy killed them without consequence. Their curses were gone.

And when the last *ara* died, Percy just stood, surrounded by piles of monster dust, and breathed.

That had gone better than he could have hoped; he'd expected to get cursed more. Percy turned back to the River behind him. He wasn't far from the confluence of the Styx and the Phlegethon, and it was best not to linger.

Percy kept walking. The waters mixed together, and Percy knew that eventually they would become the waters of the Archeron. He was close to the Keres.

"I must say," a deep voice grumbled from behind him, "I am impressed."

He turned, slowly. The being behind him stood casually, but nothing about it was casual; the aura it radiated was *wrong*. Percy's skin may have been itching to run away, or it may have been turned inside-out. His heart could be stuttering or it could be collapsing in on itself.

Percy knew instantly: this wasn't someone he'd be able to beat easily. Maybe at all.

He touched his index finger to his chest in a *who, me?* gesture. It chuckled.

Its most startling feature was that it didn't have a face; where a face typically would be was a void, filled with hissing, swirling, dark indigo flames. "I had not expected you to last this long."

The voice...Percy'd never heard a voice like it. Instead of pushing outward, through the air, it was as though this voice was sucking in the air around it and replacing the empty space. It was like a vacuum. It set Percy's hair standing on end.

"I've been watching: killing Arachne was quite the feat; you didn't fare so well against the *arai* the first time, though."

It was all Percy could do to reply. "I've learned?"

"That much is obvious," the being before him said. The being that's been watching him. The being that seemed to melt into the landscape the longer Percy watched, like it wasn't really here. Or like it was, and it came from the hills and the trees and the Rivers.

He knew who this was. "Tartarus."

“Perseus.”

Percy needed to know what it wanted. “I don’t suppose offering to kill Gaea so you can see her again will convince you to go away?”

A sword appeared in its hand. “Nice try, demigod.” Tartarus was built like Hephaestus—tall, hardened, and lean. Muscles gained through constant use be it working in the forge or fighting. It didn’t help that Tartarus might have been covered in form-fitting armor, or he could have been made of it. Either way, Percy was at a disadvantage in both defense and offense.

The armor was clearly made for intimidation. Horns curled from the helmet in every which way, some even seeming to grow back into his head. The typical weak spots Percy would target in any set of armor had gleaming sharp spikes sticking out of them. Its gauntlets glowed red in the firelight, and its grip on its sword was unshakeable.

The sword was a monstrosity. It was carved harshly out of the bone of some long dead monster; the ragged jaw was sharpened to a deadly point, teeth welded to the edges and pointing in any and every direction. Clearly it had been designed to do damage.

Percy flourished Riptide, falling into a defensive stance. He wouldn’t be able to get to the Keres, not with Tartarus hellbent on killing him. But then, he didn’t need the Keres anymore, did he?

For all that Tartarus was terrifying and formidable, it wasn’t as fast as Percy. Maybe it was adjusting to having an actual physical form, because it also telegraphed. It leapt toward him, raising his sword and slashing downwards at Percy. Percy dodged, and the fight began.

It was almost...easy. The being before him was feared by all—the gods themselves refused to even venture near the Pit, and yet Percy was holding his own in a sword fight with it. Clearly, something was up.

In hindsight, the fact that Tartarus was trying to lure him into a false sense of confidence was fairly obvious. How it actually happened—Percy getting lost in his thoughts, searching for Tartarus’s possible motivations, and getting distracted—changed nothing.

One moment, Tartarus was in front of Percy, and the next it vanished. Percy stopped and looked around, but he couldn’t see it anywhere.

It was gone—

Oh.

His back exploded, pain jumping up and down the rest of his body. The tip of the jaw and a few teeth poking from his chest were the only things tipping him off to the reality of the situation—somehow, Tartarus had gotten behind him.

The sword twisted slowly, dragging and catching and cutting and tearing and ripping a rasping scream out of Percy. And then, after forever, after eons, it stopped; Tartarus pulled the blade back out of Percy's back.

He was dead before his body hit the ground.

It was like a demigod dream, almost. Over the sound of Tartarus laughing, the entire Pit shaking with it, Percy heard elevator doors ding. There, behind him; Thanatos eyed him with interest. "You've met my mother," he said absently, staring at Percy's chest. When he looked down, the only thing he noticed was the hole in it.

And, hell, what was Percy supposed to say to that? Good news was, the longer he was dead, the more his surroundings faded to grey, so he didn't have to pretend to be pressed for time; he really was. "I don't know if you remember me, but I helped save you in Alaska. You owe me," he pleaded. "Probably. Maybe. I think? Please, I don't care if I live or die, just get me out of here."

The sights of the Pit had vanished before Thanatos replied; and when he did, the grey slowly started receding to the edges of Percy's vision.

"Return to your body," Death said. "I will grant you passage through the Doors."

Tartarus kicked Percy's body into the Phlegethon. "Not even this River can heal Death," it snarled. "Good riddance, godkiller."

When Percy opened his eyes, everything was orange. Nyx, this makes twice he's taken a bath in this fucking River. His skin tingled, burning and freezing and blistering; his lungs screamed, working, but protesting the scalding fire water.

He brought a hand to his chest. There was a huge tear in his shirt, and a rough patch of raised and bumpy scar tissue, but the wound was gone.

A tug in his gut accompanied the River spitting him back on to the

riverbank. Tartarus turned around. “What—“

“Perseus.” To his left stood Thanatos, just in front of a pair of Doors. They mirrored the doors to Olympus with the colors inverted. Death waved his hand, and they slid open.

Percy bolted towards them.

Behind him, he heard Tartarus howl, “No!” as he crashed into the back wall of the frankly dingy elevator at top speed. It charged at him. The elevator doors started sliding shut. Just as Tartarus lunged within sword’s reach, they closed fully. The room shook, and then the elevator started moving up.

Percy collapsed. He was out. He was getting out. He was going home.

He reached out to touch the doors, just to reassure himself that this was *real*—but Thanatos appeared in front of him. “I wouldn’t.”

“Oh.”

“The journey to the surface takes time,” Death explained. “Be careful not to open the Doors before that journey is complete. You’ll fade into oblivion and not even I will be able to save you.”

“How...how will I know when it’s okay to open them?” Percy asked.

Thanatos hummed. “You’ll know, godkiller.” And then he was gone.

So Percy sat. The elevator walls were a stark white, certainly the brightest color he’d seen in...hell, how long? Weeks, at least. Maybe months.

Long enough that this eerily quiet elevator ride was a welcome break. Percy laid his head back against the wall, shut his eyes, and let his mind shut down. There was nothing better he could do; stuck in a mystical elevator traveling between mythical planes to deliver him to a mythological war. Yeah. Just sitting, drinking in the silence broken only by a faint ringing in his ears and the shaky sounds of his breathing, thinking about absolutely nothing.

His mind was clear.

*The black of his eyelids was nothing compared to the emptiness of the void.*

Completely clear.

*He was wheezing. Was that from the toxic air, had his broken ribs not healed correctly, or had he been cursed?*

No thoughts.

*The scar running down his torso twinged—Percy jumped and swatted at the air in front of him. It was empty. He was alone.*

Head empty.

*Only the strong survive.*

He'd done it. He'd escaped. He'd been strong. Maybe for too long. The harder he tried to clear his thoughts, the more awful memories floated to the front of his mind: standing in the middle of a lake of poison, convinced he was going to die; being cursed by the *arai*, almost dying and...and Annabeth being in danger; Polybotes cackling while he just *laid* there; Tartarus showing up and trying to kill him itself.

He could fall apart later; Percy took a deep, trembling breath, and exhaled deliberately. Right now, he was prepared for whatever would face him when he got out.

He would be strong when he needed to be.

As if on cue, the elevator lurched to a stop. Percy's head shot up, eyes fixed on the doors.

They dinged, and started to slide open.

## End Notes

6/19/22, 4am: part 2 coming soon depending on when i write the last 15 paragraphs and how much hype this gets,, you guys *know* that comments and bookmarks with funny messages literally beat my impulse control to death because impulse control is *Nothing* compared to validation lmao

1/30/23, almost 3am: fun fact one arai is called an ara so i fixed that and also made the italicization more consistent bc it was bothering me during my reread for ideas for TiN :)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!